

The Time for Nihilism

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Special Issue Introduction: The Time for Nihilism—Philosophy, Metaphysics and Education

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Fundamental Nothing

Ontological analysis of knowledge in education might begin by distinguishing between knowledge and the determining force that defines knowledge as significant or otherwise. Under the pressure of this division “knowledge itself” eludes any grasp. And without the ballast of a determinant knowledge, what becomes of education—except to be a technology of the self?

Fundamental conditions of possibility for knowledge are implicitly elaborated in *Being and Time* (1927/1962). In *What is Metaphysics?* (1935/1993) Heidegger rehearses some of the themes of *Being and Time* but gives attention to what he calls the “nothing” that lies beyond the attention of science or practical knowledge. This metaphysical analysis has implications for understanding the foundations of knowledge—its ontological conditions. This is a dimension of understanding—a dimension of knowledge also, of course—that is effectively foreclosed in dominant accounts of education, and in particular, in what passes for the philosophy of education. It is hardly surprising given that this dimension of knowledge necessarily addresses and foregrounds the “nothing” that attends knowledge. This nothing oddly doesn’t negate. On the contrary, it is its driving force.

Such foreclosures—cutting out significant elements before they ever enter to trouble the scene—are necessary for educational knowledge as we know it. And for academic educational discourses.

Just as philosophy of education has foreclosed any account of the fundamental ontological significance of the apparatuses of education, as though knowledge, learning and all the favoured “concepts” for analysis in establishment philosophy of education could exist outside of the institutional technologies of education and could float in some ideal space that would be innocent of history and uncontaminated by the social forces and structures that frame them (Blake, Smeyers, Smith & Standish, 2002; Hirst and Peters, 1971; Peters, 1966; Pring, 2000), so this collection seeks to get in touch with fundamental questions that attend education and that particularly attend the ontotheological privilege accorded to education in the institutionalized field of knowledge that is “philosophy of education.” Its starting point is a consideration of metaphysical questions activated

by a contemplation of the “nothing” that attends knowledge, thinking and being. This collection addresses education in terms of that nihilism.

Heidegger offers a provocative opening into questions concerning the foundations of knowledge. Heidegger’s general project is to recover the thinking of Being that he claims has been lost to western metaphysics. This involves cultivating a concern for Being as such, independently of any specific domain of being or any specific entities (beings) (Heidegger, 1962). This gap between Being and beings is what Heidegger refers to as “the ontological difference.” The proper task of metaphysics—what metaphysics properly *is*, according to Heidegger—is to think this difference and pursue its implications. So Heidegger seeks to define what he means by metaphysics beyond the definitions it has been given in the tradition of western thought and philosophy (Heidegger, 1993). According to Heidegger, western metaphysics has characteristically closed down the question of Being. Ontology has been limited by onto-theology, the determination of Being by some overarching principle or idea.

In both defining what metaphysics is and staking a claim for its proper significance, Heidegger’s argument moves against the idea that science alone—concerned as it is with “beings”—can be the paradigm for knowledge, independently of metaphysics. Only metaphysics can provide the thinking necessary to renew the pursuit of truth that connects knowledge with Being, above and beyond amassing and classifying bits of knowledge and fragmenting them into specializations. Charged with this essential role, metaphysics comes up with some uncomfortable realizations. If specific sciences—or forms of knowledge—deal with particular realms of things, then beyond that specificity they are necessarily concerned with nothing. Absorbed with its own world of things, any science must then concern itself, beyond that world of specific things, with nothing. Rather oddly, perhaps, Heidegger interrogates this nothing to explore its significance. The argument asserts that metaphysics must concern itself with the nothing that science must not concern itself with and that yet defines what it is.

This nothing, as it turns out, is both troubling and persistent. Although it may in effect be largely ignored—as nothing—yet it has an unavoidable tendency to make itself felt, not, of course, as a troubling presence, but more as a troubling absence. Concerned less that this line of questioning be seen as merely abstruse semantic play, Heidegger’s exploration of the question of the nothing goes on to examine the factors that exist beyond the particular, ostensible concerns of science or knowledge in its formal sense.

It turns out that the nothing that relates to science is very much closer to home than this initial discussion might suggest. This nothing partakes of the general condition of existence: what is more this nothing belongs to the domain of meaning, oddly, perhaps. It actually has a strongly determining force in relation to that domain, a domain that cannot really be absent from almost any pursuit or any

activity, including, paradoxically, science, but also all forms of knowledge and understanding (Heidegger, 1993).

Exploring the ontological conditions of knowledge, Heidegger claims that intellectual understanding is actually and necessarily predicated on forms of understanding that are not at all intellectual, that belong to what we can provisionally call moods, “attunement” or “being attuned” (“mood” is Heidegger’s translation of Aristotle’s terms “pathos”). Heidegger’s approach to ontology initially (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 71-77) goes through an account of “Dasein” as the bearer of the question of Being so that no account of knowledge can bracket off the specific form of being that is “the entity which we ourselves are” (Derrida, 1987, p. 17).

In order, partly, at least, to problematize the conventional notion of the human subject as a transcendental consciousness, Heidegger insists on keeping with the term Dasein. It is only via the specific being of Dasein—in its “thrownness” and with its worldly attachments, care and anxiety, that the question of Being can be posed at all. In the extensive analysis in *Being and Time* it emerges that Dasein is always in some kind of mood. The being or orientation to Being of Dasein is in fact structured by mood. For Heidegger the concept of mood used here is not to be understood as mere feeling, as transient emotion or superficial psychological state. Mood is fundamental in defining the way that Dasein experiences being in the world (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 172-178). Heidegger returns to the ontological significance of mood in his ruminations on nothing in *What is Metaphysics?* (1993).

Heidegger asks is there a mood that corresponds to an understanding of the nothing beyond the limit of given knowledge: “Does such an attunement in which man [sic] is brought before the nothing itself occur in human existence?” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 100). The answer that emerges is “anxiety.” Anxiety in this sense is not any specific anxiety about something in particular, that Heidegger categorizes as “fear,” but the “fundamental mood of anxiety” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 100). This generalized anxiety may be likened to a persistent background noise that may only trouble us—consciously, at least—at certain times of solitude or alienation. It relates to what we might call the primordial nothing, the nothing of all things: and is intensified by the realization of the possibility of nothingness, non-existence—or death. In spite of its necessary relation with nothing, this anxiety, however, is at the same time productive—giving rise to the productive world-making activities of Dasein and ultimately to the question of Being.

The “fundamental mood of anxiety” is the state “in which the nothing is revealed” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 101) and connects back with the analysis of the being of Dasein that Heidegger undertakes in *Being and Time* in relation to the fact of death. Dasein is characterized as “being-towards-death” (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 299-311). Death is defined as: “an end beyond all completion, a limit beyond all limits” (Heidegger, 2000, 168); and as: “this uncanny thing” (Heidegger, 2000,

168); what's more, there is "no way out in the face of death" (Heidegger, 2000, 169).

Interestingly this confrontation with the inescapable nothing occurs "not only when it is time to die but constantly and essentially" (Heidegger, 2000, 169): hence the term, "being-towards-death" as a way of defining Dasein ontologically. Just like the "nothing" that Heidegger identifies as the condition of Dasein's knowledge, being-towards-death is identified as a fundamental condition of Dasein. What's more, and crucially for the present account, the constant, generalized anxiety-towards-death is experienced also metonymically, in all the possible and actual anxieties that might relate to everyday and experiential endings, nonbelongings and dissolutions but more interestingly, perhaps, in all commitments. It is as though commitment itself must be predicated on some kind of nothing.

What does this do for our understanding of nihilism? For Heidegger, Dasein's "thrownness" indicates the contingent, historically specific nature of understanding, knowing, acting. To use a different language, world and subject are necessary for one another but this encounter occurs entirely with what Catherine Malabou might refer to as an ontology of the accident (Malabou, 2009). Heidegger's Dasein is always of the world, so too the world is of Dasein. The use of the term Dasein is, among other things, an attempt to avoid the category of the subject with its metaphysical potential for worldless abstraction. Dasein inhabits a world that is at the same time always a "Mitwelt" and is therefore always already engaged with others and with the things of its world which constitute the horizon of its being. Dasein is formed by the world it inhabits while also being attributed with world-forming potential. Again, the element of contingency is important.

The concept of world in Heidegger has far-reaching phenomenological implications. On a number of occasions, Heidegger explores the relations between world and things. In short, through the implications of the world-creating condition of Dasein, it emerges that the things of the world are not simply there in some inert and pre-given way. The things of the world—in their relations with Dasein—are the products of the contingency, anxiety and attendant care of Dasein. It is this "care" ("sorge") that invests things with significance, imbues them with specific meanings—identity, in effect—and animates them within the context of an inherited but actively inhabited world. It is evident then that anxiety, the apprehension of the nothing and being-towards death are related components of "uncanniness" that may at any time disturb the everyday consciousness of things; on the other hand they are the necessary pre-conditions for care and for the production of the world and the things of the world that characterize Dasein's being.

Nihilism and Deconstruction

Nihilism, we might say, is the awareness of this disturbance and of the drive it gives rise to in a context where there is no external, guiding transcendental or

ontotheological principle to reach for. Heidegger's "case" is illustrative of one way of understanding what nihilism is. For Heidegger the disavowal, in effect, of the "transcendental signified" and the repudiation of ontotheology implies neither loss of meaning, nor existential slump into inert indifference. On the contrary, we might say that a properly Heideggerian nihilism relates questions concerning meaning to the nothing that attends all things. Nihilism in Nietzsche's view signalled a danger, a failure to meet the effective challenge of the implication of Zarathustra's declaration that "God is dead!" (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 5). But Heidegger demonstrates that meaning and being-in-the-world necessarily consort with one another via the nothing—and without recourse to some idealized transformation into the trans-human.

Towards the end, Heidegger invites us to consider that western metaphysics, philosophy, may have run its course and that, without the props of ontotheology—that deeply ingrained way of thinking that relies on some overarching principle: God, reason, progress, "man," language ...—thinking must struggle to find ways of engaging with the loss of enchantment that recognition of the nothing, or nihilism, may carry with it. A good deal of modern thought confronts this problem of the absence of the transcendental signified. A good deal of modern thought and institutional practice seeks rather to substitute one transcendental principle with another, or with a series of related, signifiers. Education offers a powerful example of the relatively recent emergence of an ontotheological principle that can offer both individual and social salvation in the face of the depredations of "technological enframing" or "instrumental rationality" (Heidegger, 1977; Weber, 1964).

What nihilism is "ultimately" is contentious and problematic but somehow also essential: a condition, but not in and of itself a malaise, a fall or a catastrophe to be overcome. Nihilism certainly appears as a historical mode of being-in-the-world and constitutes a significant dimension of the heritage of modernity. After Freud's three blows to humanist narcissism, ontotheology could only survive as anachronism. The Copernican/Galilean revolutionary rethinking of the cosmos, the Darwinian account of evolution and the Freudian deconstruction of rationality had all had radically de-centering effects (Freud, 1977). Events of the twentieth century and a good deal of serious thinking in that period can only have served to exacerbate—or enhance—the sense that nihilism's time has come. Faith in some transcendental figure, force or destiny cannot be sustained.

Derrida's affirmation of deconstruction, following, extending and reforming Heidegger's thinking, may demonstrate what thinking might be after the recognition that the history of western metaphysics is the history of the determination of being-as-presence that ends in nihilism of one kind or another (Derrida, 2001). Derrida points out, though, that several thinkers who undermined key aspects of ontotheology—Nietzsche and Freud for instance—could only do so by drawing on the resources of western metaphysics, turning the resources of rationality against

itself, as it were, enacting a torsion in the direction of thinking in order to undermine ontotheological dead-ends. What they achieve is a kind of permanent destabilization, a radical illustration that various “theologically” inscribed concepts get put under erasure in various “ways of thinking” in modernity:

... Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysics, and especially of the concepts of Being and Truth, the Freudian critique of self-presence, a critique of consciousness, of the subject, of self-identity, and of the self-proximity or self-possession, and more radically...the Heideggerean destruction of metaphysics, of the determination of Being as Presence (Derrida, 2001, p. 54).

Such ontotheological principles cannot provide the centering, controlling force for a structural totality either of reality or of our understanding of it. In ‘Structure, Sign and Play’ (2001), Derrida writes of a movement from “God” to “Man” to “language” where these ideas stand in succession as dominant organizing principles (for understanding the question of Being, in Heidegger’s terms). It turns out that the last of these, language, as a decentred structure exemplifies possibility for the turning of the heritage of western metaphysics against itself.

Language, in effect, Derrida demonstrates for the rest of his varied writing career, cannot be a stabilizing or centring principle. As a metonymy for being it illustrates a radical indeterminacy and an endless deferral—of meaning, of presence, of finality of any kind—structured always by the simplest principle of absence, “spacing.” Nihilism—in so far as it may signify an absent centre or a reminder that all presence must also be constituted by absence (nothing)—is perhaps an inevitable consequence of this movement. Language cannot serve an ontotheological function: it is itself characterized by “spacing,” the necessary intrusion of “nothing” that enables difference to be the only structuring principle that can hold—and cannot hold—the whole together (Derrida, 1976). In this movement of thought Derrida explores the structuralism of Levi-Strauss and by a perfectly happy contingency—in an argument that suggests that a certain contingency alone is sovereign (in scare quotes)—engages with the distinction in *La Pensee Sauvage* between engineer and bricoleur. It turns out that the engineer in the movement of this particular deconstructive move will have to be rethought as nothing more than another kind of bricoleur—that is a maker who is defined by having to rely on what’s ready-to-hand for materials and for principles of construction. Such “objects” of construction that arise, including all big ideas about Being, can only be produced retrospectively, as their origin, necessarily obscure and contingent, can only be understood as the product of accident, or thrownness. This distinction stands then for what is meant by deconstruction—the recognition that the hand of the bricoleur is at work in the construction of the most elaborate and

rational systems—of thinking or of practice. There is, then, according to the logic of deconstruction, a radical contingency in the order of things that echoes the elaboration of fundamental ontology articulated in *Being and Time*.

The absence of a centre, the absence that attends presence, the spacing of language, the disappearance of the transcendental signified (God or similar) are all characterized by a certain nothing. At the same time they are in each case indicative of a certain condition of freedom, or “play,” within any structure or system (Derrida, 2001). This Derridean insight can be essential to the exploration of nihilism. It provides, paradoxically, perhaps, the very possibility of an ethics that is not rooted in morality.

These Papers

Papers in this collection put into question the grounds for contemporary faith in education. They touch upon and explore dimensions of nihilism in relation to the world of education that forecloses any trace of nihilism from its terrain and from its thinking.

Aislinn O Donnell’s paper hovers between recognition of the force of “the nothing” and the realization that while this nothing deprives us of intrinsic meaning and final purpose that is not the end of the story: accepting, embracing radical contingency might offer a perhaps muted but hard-won and more realistically attuned affirmation of a possible possibility rooted in self-generated recognition of “the nihil.” The alternative to the transcendental offered in this case is modest, warm and genial and is certainly original. A kind of nihilism that recognizes the provenance of failure and pain may enable us to grasp what is most essential about our *mitsein* in terms of recognizing and belonging to one another as opposed to the often hollow promises and alienating effects of fulfilment through the endless labour of individual and collective self-improvement promoted by the educational language of aspiration and performance. Here a kind of nihilism modestly proposes an anti-heroic ethic and envisions the possibility of an anti-heroic pedagogy in a move towards a politics of decency.

For Ansgar Allen nihilism is embodied and embedded in the western heritage that is sustained in the essential ethic of education. Education has become attached to an expression of a certain western will to mastery—as an all absorbing maw that defines not only what we are but what we might aspire to be. An education attached to enlightenment ideals that has patently failed in its own mission now defines all who fall within its determining sphere as falling short of the ideal it has itself failed to realize. Education colluded with the idea of mastery inherent in “reason” as ontotheological principle and this is our dispirited heritage. The dark alter ego of education, the shadow figure of the pursuit of mastery, turns out to be the impossible Sade, whose repulsive spectre holds out mastery or failure as the misbegotten opposition that holds the dominant metaphysic of our time together.

Many live within its sickening see-saw logic, so that a vital question for the educator is: How to live with the institutionalized nihilism, how not to succumb to the pleasures of despair? Allen suggests that there is no way out for us, certainly not the false ideals of redemption. There is only perhaps a way down, a “downgoing” in fact—whatever that may mean—to find another way of being within a nihilism we have, historically speaking, collectively, albeit unconsciously, unwittingly created.

Roy Goddard explores the logic and imputations of Ray Brassier’s exploration of nihilism regarded as a speculative opportunity in an extended paper that offers a useful introduction to a complex contemporary text. Brassier’s positions are explored in terms of their bases but Roy’s explication also considers some of the serious questions that attend them. Some implications for education are also explored. This chapter provides a powerful introduction to some serious contemporary philosophy but also considers, against the grain of all hegemonic philosophy of education, the possible relations between philosophy at the cutting edge and education with an ontological emphasis. Brassier’s philosophy, as Goddard outlines it, is challenging to all the humanist assumptions that attend education as we know it with its deeply humanist ethic and its modernist addiction to the government of “souls.”

Nick Peim’s paper considers that deconstruction, in effect, does thinking differently and offers a challenge to the history of philosophy, understood as a rationally developmental practice, in relation to the domain of tragedy considered as a complementary form of deconstruction. Drawing heavily of *The Birth of Tragedy* this paper considers that tragedy, like deconstruction, offers a take on the world that eschews ultimate, ontotheological groundings. It is at home in the realm of aporia. It affords space for a thinking that revisits some of the most cherished assumptions about both philosophy and education of our time and context. Some of the excitement conveyed in Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* might be recaptured including the apparently daring, or at least rare, possibility of thinking beyond education rather than attempting to redeem education. The encounter with nihilism is here felt to be bracing (Nietzsche, 1956).

Harriett Pattison’s paper, focusing on the troubling topic of time, subjects education to a strong dose of nihilism as a way of thinking outside of, beyond, or at least differently from, its own all-encompassing metaphysical order. The key to this is an understanding of education’s projection of temporality where the *fulfilment* of time is seen in terms of the realization of narrowly conceived educational goals. Such conceptions of time, for Pattison, have an ontotheological cast: they project a vision of how the world should be and how your place in the world should be. Nietzsche provides an alternative possibility for the rethinking of our relations to time outside of the dominant temporal regime of education.

Frances Atherton looks at nihilism through another perspective, from an attempt to communicate the grain of the life of homeless destitution. Here nihilism

is conceived of as lived experience. Among the dispossessed, nihilism takes the form of a way of life. Those whom Kristeva might have identified as “abject” disturb our image of ourselves. In this world, the standard model of education as self-improvement or as social redemption is rendered absurd. Atherton’s paper doesn’t dwell on abstract conceptions of nihilism but finds here, among the homeless, paradoxically, perhaps, that the brutal “education” of the world of the homeless gives rise to a more desentimentalized realization of the Nietzschean ideal of self-fashioning creativity than those more cheerful, educationally hegemonic accounts of “human flourishing” could ever achieve. It is a powerful occasion for thinking alternatively: for thinking beyond the constraints of the normativity of accomplishment and achievement.

Similarly, perhaps, Paul Moran presents the difficult, instructive case of a “looked after child” to rethink the privileged ethic of education. Here the systems of meaning and identity that strongly characterize the world of education and effectively shape the social are represented as metaphysically produced and reproduced within the institutions’ (of education) habitual practices, rather than belonging to the natural order of things or being ordained by pure reason. Lest we think too easily that nihilism blithely offers a positive occasion for creative self-fashioning we are reminded of the strictures of the symbolic order, its subtle apparatuses and its strongly ingrained states of mind that sustain quite dramatic forms of exclusion while operating in the name of other, more comforting metaphysical principles. Moran considers Nietzsche’s “death of God” in at least two ways: one as turning point in thinking; another as a revelation that things are not as they are due to some God given providence or necessity. The educational world-symbolic-order decrees normative being to exclude or delimit the being of those—the refugee, the dispossessed, the looked after child—who are abjected. The troubling case presented here through this abject figure renders the nature of things educational troubled and troubling in a far reaching way.

Education: The Future of an Illusion

The papers here lead into a consideration of another perspective on nihilism, one offered by Bernard Stiegler (b. 1952). Stiegler provides a description of modernity that puts faith and fidelity at the centre. But for Stiegler both are understood essentially from a social perspective. This perspective encourages us to reconsider some of the most enduring and powerful ideas that are offered in an attempt to bind together an experience of the world that is fractured by differences and crises of faith. The papers in this collection tend to put into question our collective faith in education, not in order to promote a universal faithlessness but to re-examine the ontotheological commitment to an apparatus that seems, in so many ways, to do the opposite of what it promises or at least to contradict its mythical mission. If the privileged status of education derives from a discredited vision, it warrants

rethinking: not to redeem it from its fallen self; not to reform it into an improved version. The challenge is to put into question the privileged status of education as idea, as apparatus and as global social project.

For Stiegler, who closely follows, extends and develops Heidegger's fundamental ontology, society can be understood as "an apparatus for the production of fidelity" (Stiegler, 2013, p. 59). Stiegler notes, following Weber, that in the modern era capitalism transformed fidelity. In modern societies "trust understood as fiduciary calculability" became the order of the day; the crisis of 2007-2008 turned what credit was left in this "fiduciary" faith into discredit, giving rise to a new form of "disbelief"—a condition of social nihilism.

Our era experiences the "disenchantment brought about by rationalization" in more intense form (Stiegler, 2013, p. 59). For Stiegler, for whom human life is always strongly characterized by a "prosthetic ontology," the apparatuses of meaning-making have a strong bearing on questions of fidelity, belief and faith. We experience the world to a significant degree through such means in so far as we experience life as "worth living." According to Stiegler, contemporary loss of faith correlates with a long process stemming from the renaissance "reading revolution." For Stiegler the real meaning of the renaissance is in a transformation of prosthetic memory via the printing press and access to "grammatization" that leads into modernity and beyond. This process is recently enhanced, transfigured by the digital revolution that produces an extension to the world of literature: producing "an internet of things," the "hypermateral structure" of the contemporary life-world (Stiegler, 2013, p. 59-60).

Following Heidegger, Stiegler notes that the rise of rationality occurs not only in the register of reason but also and significantly in the register of calculation that comes to stand as a prosthetic extension of what reason is. Through both reason and rational calculation, "Divine logos" becomes subject to secular reading (law is mystical but text is everyday) and this in turn concurs with the process whereby, according to Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche, "the suprasensible" is put into question. Stiegler points out that Nietzsche knew that his declaration of the death of God was premature and that its meaning was "to come." For Nietzsche it would be a long time before "those who murdered God would be capable of comprehending their gesture": "I have come too early...This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men" (Stiegler, 2013, p. 61). Is not now an apt time for the encounter with nihilism?

Oddly, perhaps, Stiegler's nihilism arises from the analysis of "prosthetic ontology," and the role of the thing as a central figure in his account of *things*. Taking a Lacanian-Althusserian position, Stiegler reminds us that relations with things are always freighted with meaning, loaded with desire. Things populate our world(s) not as neutral debris that just happens to be lying around nor as pure functional tools that we can put to use to serve other, thing-less purposes, but rather

as expressions of a symbolically rendered imaginary relation to the world that also binds us to one another. The primordial “thing” or object of attachment and desire is cathected onto things: the world is shaped and ordered by things in this sense. Things have world-forming functions and express an aura of the absolute other. At the same time at the heart of “the thing” there is an essential nothing without this aura of attachment that is not a property of the “thing itself.”

The thing of desire is the impossible (although essential) object: a kind of nothing that is at the same time “the a priori of desire...” (Stiegler, 2013, p. 61). This idea of the thing and things in general as both fundamental (“what makes life worth living”) to the milieu or medium for “relations of fidelity” (Stiegler, 2013, p. 62) and as existentially and essentially empty is partly drawn from Jean Baudrillard’s “system of objects” and partly drawn from Derrida’s logic of the “pharmakon” (Derrida, 1981). The very constitution of a specific world and *mitsein* is characterized by a collective relation to things that operate as transitional objects in the Winnicott sense: things exist in the form of a tie or seal within a system of supportive entities that holds the world together (Winnicott, 1953). Such things accrue value within the realm of symbolic exchange and mutuality. They are otherwise devoid of content or empty characterized by a necessary nothing. In this sense, again, nihilism is essential.

For Stiegler, one serious problem is that under capitalism the aura of things shifts as things become increasingly disposable, even structurally obsolescent. Their symbolic value becomes more transitory and uncertain to a radically different degree. Hannah Arendt had foreseen that this “systematic infidelity” destroys “the sustainability of the world.” This description of the present order of things—where “everything solid melts into air”—strikes a chord with Jean-Francois Lyotard’s law of adaptation that holds under the postmodern condition, as well as with Zygmunt Bauman’s condition of “liquid modernity” (Arendt, 1958; Marx & Engels, 2008; Bauman, 2000; Lyotard, 1986). Liquid selves living in a world of liquid fear where the basic unit of the social bond is hollowed out and the ultimate, nightmare scenario is made of “consumers without object.” Stiegler’s account of things is predicated on a historical sense of radical shifts between orders of *techne* towards the present, digital order populated by “internauts” who occupy, engage with, exchange and find meaning in an “internet of things” (Stiegler, 2013, p. 63).

Stiegler’s argument is couched in terms of crisis: as though the present condition or the condition of the present represents a historically new condition of loss. It is lapsarian: it projects back, by implication, at least, to a time of more finely attuned relation between human and *techne* encapsulated in the rather romantic image of the “...sealhunter who carves his harpoon” (Stiegler, 2013, p. 84). Accordingly, Stiegler’s account of contemporary global conditions is organized around the idea of salvation based on the metaphor of healing, referring to a “pharmacology of the spirit” and “a pharmacology of symbolic relations” meaning,

effectively, a return to a prior relation to the world through the things of human production (Stiegler, 2013).

But is it necessary to represent the sense of crisis in our time as the expression of lapsarian thinking? Crisis expressed in terms of loss of meaning is a common theme that has engaged a great deal of would-be ontological thinking. Stiegler is one among many—Weber, Heidegger, Marcuse, Adorno, Derrida, Bauman, and others—who have updated Freud’s discontented civilization through an account of the present condition (Weber, 1957; Heidegger, 1977; Marcuse, 1964; Adorno, 1990; Derrida & Roudinescou, 2004; Bauman, 2000).

After the death of God, after the discovery of the unconscious and the formless “thing” it harbours, after the various crises of modernity—including Derrida’s “twelve plagues” but also the general loss of meaning that comes with the end of grand narratives, the awareness of radical finitude, the acknowledgement of solar death to come and the perhaps humbling recognition of a necessary turn to animality: after all of these apparent falls, is it not possible, following Nietzsche’s mood, to affirm nihilism as essential rather than to wish for the recovery of something that was always already predicated on some nothing. That nothing might be the possibility that philosophy or metaphysics or thinking can survive ontotheology and can—as deconstruction has demonstrated—rethink the grounds for politics and ethics.

These papers offer modest proposals for the above.

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